

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Peter H. Boyd, Press Officer

Drew Dearnaley, Assistant Press Officer

Telephone: (212) 867-8400

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May 8, 1980ANGLICAN, ROMAN CATHOLIC  
SUPERIORS HOLD HISTORIC MEETING

CHICAGO -- Major superiors of Anglican and Roman Catholic religious communities met here May 3 for the first time and agreed to establish an Ecumenical Consultation of Religious to promote ecumenical dialogue and, in the words of one participant, "to make us people who can't stay apart."

Admitting that he had "no historic words to open this historic meeting," the Rev. Donald P. Skwor, SDS, associate director of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, called the gathering a "sign of greater things to come" and urged the twenty-two superiors general and provincials present to discern what the religious communities can "specifically contribute" to the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue.

Superiors of several communities described a number of ecumenical experiments in which their members were already engaged, including covenants of prayer and fellowship, reciprocal personnel arrangements, and economic strategies.

At the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif., Roman Catholic Benedictine monks form a single community with the Anglican Order of the Holy Cross and "share everything but the eucharist." In the Caribbean, Roman Catholic Atonement Friars in Jamaica are embarking upon an exchange program with Anglican Franciscans in Trinidad. And in a major American city, a Roman Catholic priest celebrates mass each week in an Anglican convent chapel.

More dramatic ecumenical progress was reported overseas, "where people are thrown together out of need" and close personal relationships develop.

In Tanzania, where identical liturgical books are in use, Anglican and Roman Catholic priests occasionally supply for one another, celebrating the eucharist for one another's congregations, but communion is not shared. In Haiti, however, Anglican sisters regularly receive the eucharist at a Roman Catholic mass because their chaplain is not always able to travel into the mountains where they serve.



And in England, the Economic Commission on the Contemplative Life was formed to negotiate tax relief for hard-pressed Anglican as well as Roman Catholic monasteries. And a Roman Catholic charitable trust, established to relieve the poverty of contemplatives, recently named an Anglican priest one of its four trustees.

Despite increasing ecumenical involvement, contacts between Anglican and Roman Catholic communities are still largely social and individual. According to the Rt. Rev. Benedict Reid, OSB, abbot of St. Gregory's Abbey, Three Rivers, Mich., "Franciscans fraternize with Franciscans and Benedictines with Benedictines. It comes down to who you know."

The major superiors easily agreed that Anglican and Roman Catholic religious communities experience similar problems, among which are insufficient numbers, the tension between prayer life and the demands of the apostolate, and the schizophrenic effects of renewal and updating.

While the problems are common, real differences and fears emerged which pose challenges -- if not obstacles -- to further ecumenical involvement.

According to Father Paul Wessinger, SSJE, superior of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, Cambridge, Mass., it is "largely because of the theological teaching of Vatican II and relationships with Roman Catholic religious that some Anglican communities haven't 'had it.' "

For some Anglican sisters, however, Vatican II caused a loss of "religious identity" among their Roman Catholic counterparts and, as a result, "some Anglican women religious are afraid to get involved ecumenically for fear of losing their identity also."

In terms of spirituality, Anglican religious look more to Roman Catholic contemplative orders while Roman Catholic religious -- especially women's congregations -- continue to rely heavily upon Ignatian spirituality.

And while Roman Catholics view the reform of church law as a continuing struggle for autonomy, Anglicans have striven to gain such canonical recognition, succeeding only last year in having an appropriate canon adopted.

The Very Rev. Kevin F. McMorrow, SA, superior general of the Atonement Friars, said that the pluralistic culture in which Anglican and Roman Catholic religious communities presently exist suggests the possibility of divergent modes of religious life and ecumenism, each with its own accompanying tensions. "People will gradually begin to accept such divergences," he predicted, "but in the meantime religious need to affirm one another where they are."



According to the Rev. Connor Lynn, OHC, superior general of the Order of the Holy Cross, "ecumenism is just as much a Gospel priority as justice and peace. Our future actions," he said, "should make us a people who can't stay apart."

Initially, the proposed Ecumenical Consultation of Religious will be composed of eight members, four Anglicans and four Roman Catholics, representing the Conference on the Religious Life (Anglican), the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (Roman Catholic), and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (Roman Catholic).

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